MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW

They Took Their Stand: The Agrarian View After Fifty Years

ANDREW LYTLE

THIS TITLE IS for me ambiguous. Of the twelve agrarians who wrote the symposium *I'll Take My Stand,* only three are alive: Robert Penn Warren, the poet and novelist; Lyle Lanier, a psychologist and former executive vice-president of the University of Illinois; and myself, a writer and reader of fiction. I don't presume to speak for either Warren or Lanier, and I don't know how to address myself to myself in the past tense. Perhaps I am not here at all. Secretly I've had the feeling I was killed at the Battle of Brice's Cross-Roads, taking the bullet meant for General Forrest. You understand it was Forrest who, if he'd been let, could have been decisive in winning the war of the Northern Rebellion. Too often Confederate forces won the field only to retreat later on. Brice's Cross-Roads, fought in Mississippi, was a perfect battle. It should be an example of such in the text books of war colleges. Forrest combined his forces at the right time, defeated an enemy with odds of two to one against him, and then pursued the enemy and drove him out of the state—not to speak of the seizure of supplies which was large. So perhaps it will be all right to speak of myself in the third person, along with my companions in arms who must of necessity be so addressed, if what you see here is not me but my ghostly presence. But if I am a ghost, what are you?

And what then are all those good men and true who find their beliefs disembodied? For as there is God, no idea, principle or belief is ever defeated. Men are. Except those men who continue to believe and take the proper risks. I cite you Thermopylae. As military science and tactics are never either defensive or offensive but both, so no surrender need be final, not even unconditional surrender. There was a moment when the agrarians thought this, a particular moment when the country suffered the 1929 stock market crash. The book coming out after that made us seem prophets. We did not so see ourselves in the writing of it. None of us was a politician or intended, I think, any pragmatic action. We were protesting an unhappy condition of Southern affairs and a continuing conquest. Today it is clear to me, at least, that we were better prophets than we knew. I don't feel that any of us at the time could have imagined that the conditions we protested could become so rapidly worsened.

So, after the crash, for a while at least, we had hopes of making the word flesh. It was a lot of fun. We addressed one another as generals, I hope you understand facetiously but not entirely. The depression was upon us, and it was heavy. People were stealing corn in broad-open daylight, and my father turned his head. I know of a fireman in Trenton, New Jersey, who rode his bicycle into the country and stole apples to keep his family from starving. William Dodd, historian and ambassador to Germany, tried to persuade Roosevelt that he might do well to listen to what the agrarians had to say. He got the dollar a year men. I spoke to Senator Bankhead. All he could come up with was forty acres and a mule. (There were mules then. They are curiosities now.)

Before I go on, I must remind myself how pervasive was a growing acceptance of the new materialism we attacked as industrialism. The South had prospered during the First World War. In the euphoria of victory there was a general feeling that we were back in the Union. The New South propaganda of progress everywhere said as much, and most of the media of news and public information took it for granted. Farming was looked down upon. Tired of poverty and honest work, the young began to desert the land and go to town, and in town the ambitious youth took the train to New York City, as did many young men from the West. The educational world began to change its curricula. The Chancellor of Vanderbilt University announced at a crucial moment of an agrarian fight that he wanted to graduate bankers, not writers or farmers. Rumor had it that the English building, ordered by him, was to be as much like a factory as possible, and the architect obliged. It was not the Church's Thanksgiving that we chanted. A New England holiday was universally celebrated as the national Thanksgiving. This salvation of the puritan fathers after their hard winter was instilled into the minds of Southern children as the salvation of their founding fathers. One of my projects in kindergarten was cutting out and painting turkeys and tall-hatted men with bibs to paste in front of a log cabin made out of twigs. At home I was read Uncle Remus, but in public it was John Alden, why don't you speak for yourself, John? that we were read. We were not told that Captain John Smith, sailing the Atlantic coast, brought smallpox to the Indians at Plymouth and so let the Puritans land in safety. Always it was the New England story which concerned the genesis of the nation. Not the other John, John Rolfe, who was saved by the Indian maiden, Pocahontas. Their subsequent marriage made an elevating and romantic story of amity between races. No teacher knew enough to reveal the historic meaning of this incident. It was the first instance recorded in English of the Indian woman's preference for the European. The betrayal of her tribe for the white man's favors was a constant element in the pattern of Indian defeat. Nancy Ward, a beloved woman of the Cherokees, saw nothing wrong in sitting in council while living with one of the enemy. Her betrayal indicates the complexity of the Indian mind, for she never left the council and remained beloved and respected.

Whoever wins an internecine war writes the history of that war. And the textbooks as well. Lost in diaries and obscure histories, there yet survived many stories about the settlements in Middle Tennessee, both of Indians and of Americans, which would have told our young of stamina and courage. The attack on the stations around Nashville, the skillet and the kettle at a bend in the Tennessee River, or an account of that one man Spencer who lived in the arm of a hollow sycamore, alone during the hardest winter that country had known, with only half a skinning knife for protection and food. It must have been some tree, for he was so big a man, a French trader seeing his footprints jumped into the Cumberland River and swam away. He thought he was fleeing a monstrous bear. Later at a militia muster Spencer intervened between two young men who were fighting. One tried to get rough with him, whereupon he picked him up and threw him over the nine-foot fence surrounding the stockade. The man called back, "If you will just throw my horse over, Mister Spencer, I'll be getting on my way." There are a number of

these tales which along with more formal documents carry the truth about a history, the quality of a tradition.

It was not long before some of us, at least, suffered a disillusionment: it was not so clear that we were back in the Union. There were two incidents which had a good deal to do with this; at least they gave some propulsion to reforming our opinions and informing our judgments. One was the Dayton or Monkey trial in Tennessee. The trial concerned a law forbidding the teaching of evolution in the schools of the state. This law was loudly proclaimed as an attack on academic freedom. Almost alone at Vanderbilt, our philosophy professor, Dr. Herbert Sanborn, a New Englander, exposed the fallacies in scientism's argument. I first met Allen Tate in New York City. We at once began discussing the trial as a liberal attack on our traditional inheritance. Now I see it as an advanced phase of Reconstruction. Maybe they are one and the same thing. After the economic exploitation of the South, this religious attack on the Southern spirit seemed to have a double purpose: to denigrate us before the country and the world and to make us laughable as backward and ignorant. But the real aim was more insidious, a forced acceptance of belief in a secular instead of a divine order of the universe. Practically this would have meant a total, instead of an economic, dominance by the Northeast. But the soul is not so easily traduced, especially of a people who live by or close to the land. These people are religious by nature because they enjoy and suffer nature, or they starve. Of course the defense at Dayton was inadequate, depending as it did upon a strict construction of the Bible with its literal fallacy. But the Liberal attack was equally fallacious, that scientism (there is not science, only sciences) was the only truth about man and nature. Along with the Monkey trial came H. L. Mencken's journalistic description of the South as "the Sahara of the Bozarts." This is like the thief who robs a house the second time and complains that the owners do not eat with silver.

How far such calumnies influenced the twelve I won't try to say, except for myself. One of the dangers of this kind of a discussion is inflicting your own responses upon your fellows, who certainly spoke for themselves. It set me to studying American and Southern history, about which I knew little to nothing. I kept at it for seven years, with Frank Owsley to guide me. One of our professional historians, Owsley's life work was to replace biased or inaccurate accounts with the truth. Soon Tate was writing the biographies of Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis, and Warren a biography of John Brown. I was at work on Forrest. At any rate all the writers were Southern and most of them, by accident, were associated with Vanderbilt University. These men were already known or were to become distinguished in their proper occupations, whether it was history or psychology or literature. Their agrarian writings merely displayed their common cultural inheritance, which was Christian and European. Let me quote a paragraph from the statement of principles as foreword to *I'll Take My Stand:*

> Opposed to the industrial society is the agrarian, which does not stand in particular need of definition. An agrarian society is hardly one that has no use at all for industries, for professional vocations, for scholars and artists, and for the life of cities. Technically, perhaps, an agrarian society is one in which agriculture is the leading vocation, whether for wealth, for pleasure, or for prestige—a form of labor that is pursued with intelligence and leisure, and that becomes the model to which the other forms approach as well as they may.

Surely, then, it must be taken that a poet, a farmer, a banker, a historian, a school teacher, must live in a certain place and time and so exhibit the kind of belief and behavior defined by the manners and mores of that time and place. It was not necessary to be a farmer to be agrarian. It was merely the basic occupation of a commodity-producing society. The Liberal cartoons attacking us showed us with our heads under a mule's tail, or a lone privy or Necessary as George Washington

called it, with a half moon cut over the door and the door closed. It left to the imagination what was behind the door. Allen Tate remarked that he preferred an indoor commode so long as he didn't have to kneel down and worship it before using it.

Only the Liberal mind could confuse equipment with the thing itself, but then the Liberal is always promising to relieve us of our common ills at somebody else's expense. He is the propagandist of the power we opposed. It is an old fight and the agrarians were not the first to enter it. This is no time to reargue the case. The books are there to be read, and read in light of our present circumstances. I do want to emphasize that agrarianism was not an effort to reconstitute an ideal state, a utopia, unless in the sense of Sir Thomas More's utopia, an allegory criticizing his king's English and European policies. An outright statement would have lost him his head much earlier. The agrarian effort was towards the preservation of an inherited way of life, a way which was threatened but still in existence. I said it was an old fight. Napoleon tried to restore the legitimacy of kingship, but London, the center of international banking, defeated him. At St. Helena, he told Las Cases, "Agriculture is the soul, the foundation of the Kingdom; industry ministers to the comfort and happiness of the population. Foreign trade is the superabundance; it allows of the due exchange of the surplus of agriculture and home industry; these last ought never to be subordinate to foreign trade." This country's policy has reversed the order: foreign trade first, industry, agriculture a poor third. Each day news reports witness to the folly of this order.

Shortly after the American Revolution the cogent opponent to what he called the paper and patronage aristocracy was John Taylor of Caroline County, Virginia. His question was: Why set up in this country the same power we fought a war to be free of? He was speaking against banking and central government. He was a Jeffersonian but more agrarian and more lucid than Jefferson. He refused to put any hope in men themselves, but always in principles. In 1813 he published *Arator*, a collection of essays on farming and politics. The thesis was this: agriculture and politics are the sources of wealth and power. Both contain good internal principles, but both are subject to practical deterioration. If agriculture is good and the government bad, we may have wealth and slavery. If the government is good and agriculture bad, liberty and poverty. We must remember that at this date nearly ninety percent of the American population made its living by or on the land. From 1940 to 1974, the number of farms in the U.S. declined from approximately six million to a little over two million, 62 percent of our family units. Since the second world war, thirty million people have left the country for the city. You don't need more than one wrong idea to destroy a state.

I am not talking from statistics, but this great acceleration of such widespread loss of farms and families sustains my argument, which is this: at the time we wrote there were enough families living on the land and enough privately owned businesses in small towns and cities to counterbalance the great industrial might, which was a fact and had to be reckoned with. If our proposal had been listened to, this necessary industry might have been contained, might not have grown into the only idea of the kind of life everybody must be forced to accept. A family, and I mean its kin and connections, too, thrives best on some fixed location which holds the memories of past generations by the ownership of farms or even family businesses. Not only sentimental memories but skills passed down and a knowledge of the earth tended. And a knowledge particularly of the blood streams, so as to be warned and prepared for what to expect in behavior. Industry today uproots. It's like the army without having the army's raison d'etre. Promotion, except among the basic workers, means pulling up roots and being sent elsewhere, with the promise of a better car and another room to the house. The children, just as they are making friends and getting used to school, must begin all over again. This is a modification of the Spartan state, which reduced the family to a minimal role.

The most irresponsible of our critics accused us of the self-indulgence of nostalgia, of foisting on our readers a myth, and by myth was meant something that never existed. All societies are sustained by a myth. Such a myth is of necessity metaphysical, but it was not this kind of myth the critic had in mind. He had mischosen his word. He meant fantasy, something that had no grounding in fact. It was unfortunate for this kind of argument that many of us were historians, and in Frank Owsley we had the best of professional historians. I speak of Owsley rather than Nixon because it was he and his wife, Harriet, who exposed the alien "myths" about the South—that it was composed of large plantations with Old Marster sipping juleps while the slaves sang; and on the fringe were the one-bale (if that) cotton farmers called "poor whites." He simply went to the census records where the facts were. Also to diaries and county records, but the federal census carried particular authority. One instance of this. Presumably the black belt counties would be the area of the large plantations. Now the census taker went down the road, stopping in order at this farm and that, as he went along. The Owsleys discovered the greatest diversity in ownership, large plantations by moderate size farms, small farms, a plantation of two thousand acres with no slaves, a man owning slaves and no land. I won't go on, as the authority is here to correct or amplify me, if she so wills. You see the South was never solid until after the war. Defeat made it solid.

The misunderstanding, even among the most sympathetic critics, like Louis Rubin, have assumed that a commodity-producing society, such as the South and West, had not a chance of sustaining itself before the successive triumphs of the financial corporate role of money. And this kind of money is always international. They were vague about this corporate rule, but they accepted as absolute the *ex post facto* assumption of the relative poverty of the Southern farm and its ultimate doom. The confusion lies just here. The communities composed of families with real property and private businesses still existed. The fight was on, but the outcome was uncertain. The depression was a heavy blow. Cotton cost seven cents a pound to grow and it brought on what is essentially the world market five cents. The only answer Roosevelt's government could give was plow under a fourth of your labor, cotton, corn, hogs, and cattle. This is the most immoral fiat ever handed down from afar: destroy your handicrafts and life for an abstract stock market purpose. Where was the Joseph to talk of lean and fat years, store away instead of destroy.

The communities were the shape of society, even after the First World War. I was there. I lived in them. Most of the towns in the South, and cities, too, lived by the country. My argument in two essays was this: the small farm upholds the state. I didn't give any number of acres. What I meant was a family owned and operated place. If the place has no mortgage, you live in a dwelling house without paying money for rent. If you plow with a team, you grow your own fuel. You grow most of your food. You do grow crops for money, but you are not completely in the money economy. You live at home with security. And you are part of a living community, with other families in your situation, some better to do than others, as will always be the case.

Now witness the county seat. I'm speaking from experience again. All the roads radiating from the seat are privately owned. They had toll gates every five miles, and to pass through cost so much, a buggy twenty-five cents, so much a head for sheep. I used to go with my father to collect toll, and the money, all coin, would be stacked in order, silver dollars, halves, quarters, on down to dimes and nickels, and they all smelled of snuff. There were very few paper bills. This means that you didn't leave home idly. You lived in a community with a radius of say five miles. This lasted almost until I went to college. The automobile was in its infancy. It was a toy for those who could buy. The ladies wore veils and everybody wore dust coats when "the machine," as it was called, took you out for a short spin. People would call and ask if you were going to bring it out. It scared their

mettlesome carriage horses. And rightly so. It was the horses' doom. But it took some years before it broke up the community. Thirty miles an hour was fast. The roads were not fit for speed. It took the greater part of the day to go from Huntsville, Alabama, to Guntersville, forty miles away. Punctures were frequent, or a mud hole with brush in it would delay you for maybe an hour, until you could find somebody to hitch up his team and pull you out. Of course unless the team was obviously nearby and the hand out. My father had a Ford tractor. It could break four acres a day, but so could a good team. He used it for disking, as broken ground is hard on animals. This was for Cornsilk, a twelve hundred acre place, which the T.V.A. stole and covered up with water.

This family farm I talked about earlier (here I am not referring to Cornsilk) was dismissed as a "subsistence farm." In the first place, there is no such thing as a subsistence farm. That is an adjective used by a voice who thinks milk comes out of bottles, or a term that applies possibly to land so poor that no insurance company would give it a mortgage. But even land such as this is no subsistence farm. Even this has its place in society. If it has little money and no credit to buy advertised products, it still has a life of its own. When the T.V.A. began to build all those dams, making of the best land a permanent flood to control floods, it had to buy a little place near Muscle Shoals. This place was so poor it had no mortgage against it, but the shack did have a chimney whose fire had not gone out in a hundred years. "Eminent domain" or not, the T.V.A. had to move that chimney, the coals covered and hot, to its new location. The point is not that the move cost more than the price of the farm. The point is that from the mirage of history, fire on the hearth has been the symbol of the home. Neolithic man "identified the column of smoke that rose from his hearth to disappear from view through a hole in the roof with the Axis of the Universe, saw in this luffer an image of the Heavenly door, and in his hearth the Navel of the Earth." The man who cherished that chimney and forced a sovereign power to preserve it was not a man who thought much of comfort, that euphemism which disguises the perfidious intention of turning man into an appetite, to be perpetually bloated by some new appeal of an expanding economy, expanding until the resources on the earth and beneath it are exhausted.

In 1928, Allen Tate, his wife, and child, and I travelled in a second-hand Ford from New York to Alabama, going over the battlefields. There were no Interstates (maybe the Pennsylvania Turnpike), but many narrow paved roads and roads with gravel, all rough in places. The outskirts of Philadelphia ended easily in the country, with its farms—and not just Amish either. (Today, from Trenton to Philadelphia there is a flow of houses which obliterates the state lines, and at night becomes one long blur of light.) Through Maryland into Virginia we camped by the side of the road or in a farmer's lot and picked his turnip greens and cooked them in a pot with sowbelly. I knew how to make a hoecake. The water and greens were free, as was the campground. If we felt we could afford it, we would stop in a village or at some courthouse with buildings about it and eat a lunch for thirty-five cents. If it was forty-five, we might drive on.

There was only one tourist camp the entire way, no buildings but a common washroom and commodes. This was outside Richmond. We pitched our pup tents here. Sometimes we washed and dressed and went into town on invitation, which was always welcome as a change of diet. The night watchman was the great-nephew of General John Bankhead Magruder, late of the Confederacy. The superintendent was the great-nephew of General A. P. Hill of the Army of Northern Virginia, whose name was called by both Lee and Jackson in their dying speech. This was the familiar world all of us were born in, and I hope I am making it clear that now I am not speaking only of the Southern terrain.

Later, I went on alone to Mississippi, where Forrest often rode. I can't believe it had changed much from war days. Going through the back country to Tupelo, I stopped to

inquire the way. Teams were hitched about the courthouse fence; a political meeting was afoot. The patriarchs, all in black hats and white beards, sat on the platform with their hands on hickory sticks. It was obvious that little of folly would take place in their presence. I was asked to "take-out" and join the crowd. I was not asked to park my Ford. I thanked the man but told him I was running late. Could he direct me to Tupelo. I was told to go down the road, and he pointed which way, until I came to a widow-woman's house, where I was to turn left. I thanked him and went on. I had no trouble finding the widow-woman's house. It had no stove wood stacked in the yard.

I've often asked myself: Why was it that so few people listened to us, although most were sympathetic. The kind of life they knew was at stake. I think the reason of their seeming indifference is this: Nobody could imagine the world they were born in, had lived in, and were still living in could disappear. Well, it has.

As my final word, I think we should have found a larger word than agrarian, for it was this whole country's Christian inheritance that was threatened, and still is. But let there be no misunderstanding. We still are subjects of Christendom. Only we have reached its Satanic phase. I can't believe that any society is strong which holds physical comfort as its quest. There is only one comfort, and it is the only thing that has been promised: the gates of Hell will not finally prevail.